

Jarosław Tomaszewicz

W kierunku nacjokracji. Tendencje autorytarne, totalistyczne i profaszystowskie w polskiej myśli politycznej (1933–1939): narodowcy – narodowi radykałowie – narodowi socjaliści
[Towards Natiocracy: Authoritarian, Totalistic, and Pro-Fascist Currents in Polish Political Thought (1933–1939) – Nationalists, National Radicals, National Socialists]

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Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego has recently published a study by Jarosław Tomaszewicz which continues his research into extremist currents in interwar Polish political thought. In 2012, the author published *Naprawa czy zniszczenie demokracji? Tendencje autorytarne i profaszystowskie w polskiej myśli politycznej 1921–1935* [Democracy Restored or Destroyed? Authoritarian and Pro-Fascist Currents in Polish Political Thought, 1921–1935] (Tomaszewicz, 2012). Grzegorz Krzywiec has described the latter as the best Polish-language introduction to the subject ever written (Krzywiec, 2013). Scanning different political camps for critics of liberal democracy, Tomaszewicz's investigation covers interwar Poland's entire political stage, from conservatives, through Pilsudskiites and agrarians, to national radicals.

This time Tomaszewicz's focus is on the 1930s. Whereas before he was trying to identify the caesuras in the internal policy of the Second Republic (these were, respectively, the entry into force of the March 1921 constitution and of the April 1935 constitution), this time he was more interested in general history. The period covered by his study begins with Adolf Hitler's rise to power in Germany (which laid the foundations for the emergence of the totalitarian Third Reich) and ends on 31 August 1939 – the last day of peace in Europe. And since the crisis of liberal-democratic political solutions affected Poland's political parties even more profoundly than ever before, the book focuses primarily on selected right-wing currents. At the same time, the author promises to continue his research into other factions active in the Polish political arena.

As for the internal structure of the work, aside from a generous introduction and a brief conclusion, it consists of five chapters ("Nationalists," "National radicals," "State nationalists," "Dissident nationalists," and "National socialists") in which the author meticulously reconstructs the political thought of these groups. As Tomaszewicz himself warns, although he risks repeating himself, that "for the sake of presenting a full,

balanced and objective picture it is important to take note of differences and idiosyncrasies” (p. 15). As a result, the chapters are divided into smaller textual units outlining the program of each party. We might say that what the reader gets is a collection of monographic studies devoted to an array of important and (more often) marginal yet nonetheless original political groupings active on the Polish political scene, such as the milieu around *Gród i Wieś* [Town and Country] magazine or the Radical Movement for Healing [Radykalny Ruch Uzdrawienia]. The author is interested in political thought in all its guises, so any ideas concerning the political, social and economic system. In practice, this means attempting to reconstruct anything that can be reconstructed based on an often incomplete source base.

Tomasiewicz has performed an impressive and truly Benedictine labor. With admirable meticulousness he has gleaned information from often not easily available ideological declarations and propaganda materials. He has examined a plethora of political manifestos and ephemera as well as dozens of press titles. Thanks to this effort, his analyses are based on texts by politicians such as Roman Dmowski, Tadeusz Bielecki and Stanisław Piasecki, but also on authors little known even to scholars of the subject. As a result, he delivers an unprecedented work to readers. Thanks to Tomaszewicz we can learn about the evolution of the Polish right in the 1930s, starting with the National Party [Stronnictwo Narodowe], through national-radical groups (particularly National Radical Camp ABC [Obóz Narodowo-Radykalny ABC] and National Radical Movement [Ruch Narodowo-Radykalny]) and smaller national camp “offspring” and splinter groups, all the way to national socialists. Although it might seem that the history of the last group was already presented in exhaustive detail by Olgierd Grott (2007), Tomaszewicz managed to add many new observations and facts to the puzzle, filling in details but also complicating the picture of Polish political thought during the period in question.

From a documentary viewpoint, *W kierunku nacjonalizmu* is an extremely valuable and in fact a unique work. Unfortunately, it lacks deep reflection on 1930s Polish politics. The lack of a theoretical framework that would make it possible to debate the author’s findings is disappointing, the conceptual scheme is at times unclear, and the author’s interpretive contribution to our knowledge of interwar Polish politics is astonishingly modest.

As the author notes, “The aim of this work is to research how and to what degree fascist ideology, triumphant in the 1930s, influenced Polish political thought” (p. 9). In order to achieve this goal, however, we need a persuasive conceptualization of fascism, all the more as “the focus of this work isn’t only on fascism in the strict sense, but also on diffuse elements of fascist ideology” (p. 11). Not only has the term “fascism” been a subject of journalistic (and political) disputes for many years, but even more importantly it has already been defined in various specialist studies and works attempting to create a typology of radical political movements

(Iordachi, 2009). In the introduction, where he makes his terminological remarks, Tomaszewicz observes: “Terminological controversies aside, by fascism I mean a set of cognate ideologies including Italian Fascism and German Nazism as well as any movements and doctrines inspired by these two prototypes” (p. 17). A few pages later, however, he says that “we must speak of fascism in the plural. From the beginning, ‘fascisms’ have been extremely diverse. As a nationalist ideology, fascism by definition had to give rise to national variants” (p. 23). As a result, the reader may be a bit confused. After all, in taking this approach the author is referring to two fundamentally different conceptualizations of fascism. It is one thing to study fascism as a type of system, whether consistent or not, and quite another to examine fascisms understood as discrete phenomena. Going down the latter path, one would have to examine the relationship between these movements and ideologies, since they transcend the Manichean duality of imitation and original. This inconsistency remains one of the main problems with this book.

In the end, the author resolves to single-handedly characterize fascism as “universal fascism,” so a certain ideal type. At its core, it is defined by nihilism, irrationalism, pessimism, militarism, radicalism, hierarchism, racism, solidarism, imperialism, the pursuit of modernization, references to pseudohistorical traditions, the striving to produce a “new man” and the cult of vitality (pp. 24–26). It is hard not to notice that this proposal is like reinventing the wheel, since many similar theories (e.g., *generic fascism*) have already been written about. Tomaszewicz’s contribution is hardly innovative. Even worse – what we get is an unclear definition that is hard to apply in practice. This is the other major shortcoming of the book. The proposed three-page definition in no way helps the reader to navigate the flood of material presented in the following chapters. What is it exactly that makes a certain ideological proposal fascist? Considering that even “totalitarianism” isn’t a sufficient qualifier (according to Hannah Arendt even Italian Fascism wasn’t really totalitarian), the question becomes pivotal. And yet Tomaszewicz fails to give precisions, to settle the matter, consistently refusing to create his own analytical model of fascism. It is regrettable that he does not make the attempt, especially having such broad knowledge about the interwar Polish political scene. As a consequence, we cannot shake off the impression that we are at the mercy of the author’s *a priori* judgments.

One example of such an *a priori* judgment, in my view, is this statement in the introductory chapter: “Polish fascism was not [...] an original phenomenon, but an echo of ideas and movements that had earlier emerged in Italy and Germany” (p. 22). The author simply assumes – clearly without proof – the “unoriginality” of Polish fascist doctrines. Aside from the fact that the very notion of fascism is at best vaguely conceptualized in the book, the reader nonetheless rightly expects some detail as to what “Polish fascism” was, even if it was mere copycatting. But we

won't find the answer. In the conclusion, Tomaszewicz states for instance: "The mission of the 'young' [members of the national camp] was characterized by concern to develop an original ideology positing a 'third way.'" Meanwhile, with regard to the National-Radical Movement often cited as a flagship example of "Polish fascism" (Rudnicki, 2018), we can read that "the most comprehensive totalitarian program [...] was developed by the Falanga. This does not mean that the Falanga was a Polish imitation of Nazism or Fascism. Springing from the home soil, it created a model with idiosyncratically Polish qualities, moreover arguably marked by an idealism that set it apart from the dark side of totalitarian practice" (p. 366). So does Tomaszewicz consider the Falanga an example of "Polish fascism"? Considering that it would have to be imitative, while he states it to have "idiosyncratically Polish qualities" – probably not. But Tomaszewicz leaves the question open. His extremely brief conclusions – just barely longer than his remarks on the definition of fascism! – are punctuated with the unrevealing statement that "peripheral fascism could only shine with reflected light." The book does not state unequivocally where "Polish fascism" was to be found, although there are several passages in which the author claims that it was not a phantom phenomenon.

It is not my task to argue against the author's assessment, but to point out that his theoretical framework – actually, lack thereof – makes it essentially impossible to debate his claims. What is it in fact that makes a strain of political thought original or merely imitative? This remains unclear. The fact that Tomaszewicz presents Polish fascism as a peripheral fascism is a striking example of postcolonial thinking. For what is peripherality if not an imperfect replication of the "proper" fascist blueprint? Contemporary research on fascism – to cite Roger Griffin (2015), for example – shows that clinging to the national idiosyncrasies argument only deepens the rift between center and peripheries, which is hardly a justifiable way to proceed.

Interestingly, in his 2012 book Tomaszewicz did not examine the political thought of the Polish communists, viewing them as "ideologically derivative and orienting themselves in relation to a completely different system of values" (Tomaszewicz, 2012, p. 10). And yet one might ask why exactly. Where did the boundaries of "inspiration" lie in the modern world in which the telegram and radio were commonplace and in which ideas reached individuals and masses more quickly than ever before? We could say that Soviet communism had its ideological roots in German idealism which paradoxically albeit unquestionably provided the impetus for the development of the Polish national movement, among others. The same philosophy left its mark on the philosophical and political posits of Italian Fascism and German Nazism. Of course, if we consistently retrace these connections we will eventually end up at Plato, which makes this argument ridiculous – all the more I would expect the author to offer the reader specific intersubjectively communicable theoretical proposals.

Tomasiewicz rightly warns against presentism (anachronism) and overemotional judgments (which scholars not infrequently succumb to). As an antidote, he suggests abstaining from projecting our own concepts onto the interwar period and using notions from the period instead. But this solution proves unfeasible in practice. Not only does it make it hard to come up with a consistent typology, but it necessitates translating the interwar conceptual scheme into categories that today's readers can understand. Meanwhile, some attempts to translate notions from the period into more familiar terms have turned particularly awry, as seen in statements like: "I use the terms '*pilsudczyzna*' or 'the legionist (post-May) camp' interchangeably with the term '*sanacja*'" (p. 16). And while academic definitions of things like the "legionist camp" or "fascism" are readily available, the term "*pilsudczyzna*" is taken straight out of either interwar journalism or the language of communist pseudo-historiography.

As a result, the analytical power of Tomasiewicz's arguments remains limited – largely due to the imprecise and operationally unworkable theoretical assumptions and sometimes the unclear language in which these arguments are phrased. It is another thing that the matter under investigation is especially difficult to conceptualize. Tomasiewicz is not the first person to have problems schematizing the large body of information on political radicalism that he has gathered and presenting it to the public in a clear fashion.

The greatest shortcoming of Jarosław Tomasiewicz's book, in my view, is the fact that it remains completely isolated from international research. Successive waves of interest in fascism and related political currents have regularly hit Western universities (first and foremost) since the end of the Second World War. True, the great majority of this literature hasn't been translated into Polish, suffice to mention the works of Ernst Nolte, Stanley Payne or Emilio Gentile. This doesn't change the fact that it features a broad array of diverse theoretical approaches and – what is key – comparative analyses of movements, regimes and varieties of fascist ideology.

Already in the stage of selecting his conceptual scheme and theoretical framework, the author would have benefited greatly from making reference – even critically – to already existing discussions. It is hard to understand, when willy nilly trying to construct his own interpretation of the ideal fascist type, why he makes no allusion to the lively debate on the notion of generic fascism (see e.g. Eatwell, 2014, pp. 67–86). Considering the research conducted at various institutions all over the world over the past decades, successfully defending the "idiosyncrasy" of this or that variety of political radicalism requires more serious effort. The fact that the author maintains claims put forward previously, i.e., by Bogumił Grott, without disputing the arguments made against them is rather disappointing. Unenlightening statements, for example that "totalitarianism required [...] the right environment – a mass society and an effective set

of instruments – a modern state apparatus and an elaborate social infrastructure” (p. 369), raise similar concerns. In light of this claim, how should we interpret the success of the Romanian Legion of the Archangel Michael, the third complete (movement, ideology, regime) example of European fascism? After all, it was built (even if it was somewhat short-lived) in a relatively poor and backward country, a largely traditional and peasant society similar – it should be noted – to the Second Polish Republic in many respects.

W kierunku nacjokracji is a book whose *forte* lies in the reconstruction of facts. Unfortunately, it does much worse on the theoretical and analytical side. The author essentially ignores the serious international debate on 1930s right-wing radicalism, and in so doing follows in the footsteps of most Polish authors. There is no question that, internationally, the most serious Polish scholars of political radicalism and totalitarianism in the first half of the 20th century are still Jerzy W. Borejsza and Franciszek Ryszka. It is regrettable that although Jarosław Tomaszewicz’s work has undeniable documentary value, it falls short on the interpretive side.

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(transl. by Dominika Gajewska)

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